

The Tuareg

Blue Men of the Desert

Often characterized as the veiled men of the Sahara, the Tuareg are nomadic stockbreeders, traders and raiders inhabiting the desert areas of Mali, Niger, and Algeria around the Ahaggar Mts and in the Ajjer of southeastern Libya. Their presence in the Sahara can be traced back to at least 1000 BC. The Tuareg originate from Hamite¹ stock and have their roots among the ancient stockbreeders of North Africa. For centuries the Tuareg were involved in the salt and gold trade from Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa, as far east as Cairo. The principal concentrations of Tuareg are in Mali, southern Algeria/southwestern Libya, and Niger. According to Ibn Khalud, a 14th century Arab historian, the Hawwara Berbers came under Arabic influence at an "early date". He does not, however, mention the *Targa*--the veiled Tuareg people (the men are veiled, not the women)--although the Tuareg probably began to come under Arabic influence in the 11th century, when the *Beni Hilal* Bedouins occupied North Africa.²

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The pastoral Tuareg are organized into 8 political units, each of which contains several tribes. Tuareg society consists of nobles, vassals, and serfs. Social status is determined through matrilineal descent.

The federations of the Tuareg are:

1. Kel Ajjer: eastern Algeria and Western Libya
2. Kel Ahaggar: southern Algeria, near Tamanrasset
3. Kel Adrar: Adras N-Foras mountains of Northern Mali (Kidal region)
4. Kel Ayr: Ayr massif of Niger (more mixture with dark skinned peoples)
5. Kel Geres: Niger, south of the Ayr Tuareg (this group has no divisions of nobles and vassals)
6. Iwellemmeden Kel Dennek: Eastern Iwellemmeden, in northern Niger
7. **Iwellemmeden Kel Ataram**: Western Iwellemmeden northwestern Mali (around Menaka)
8. **Kel Tademaket** of the **Timbuktu** region, which consists of the **Kel Insar** and **Kel Imouchou** tribes (the Kel Tademaket were largely subsumed by the Iwellemmeden Kel Ataram in the 19th century)

The Tuareg don't use the term "Tuareg" when referring to themselves; rather, they are the *Imuha*. This is especially the case with the "true" Tuareg, who are generally fair skinned Tuaregs from the Ahaggar. The term "Tuareg" probably originated with the Arabs, as the Arabs first came into contact with Tuareg peoples in an area of the Sahara called (by the Tuareg) *Targa*.

Classes: There are essentially three classes: Nobles, Vassals and Serfs (Blacksmiths). Although the Tuareg were traditionally a slave-holding people, slaves were integrated on a kinship basis (slave owners are fictive parents) and are not considered to be part of the class systems.

Noble Tuareg came from ancient Berber-speaking camel breeding society (called Lemta), and Vassals originate from ancient goat breeders. It appears that the northern camel breeders invaded southward, into lands inhabited by more sedentary goat breeders.

¹ Caucasian peoples of North Africa and the Canary Islands

² Undoubtedly, the Tuareg had contact with Arabs as early as the 7th century, when the first Arab Muslims came into North Africa.

LANGUAGE:

The Tuareg speak a Hamito-Semitic language called Tamashek (or Tamashak), which is traditionally written using the still extant *Tifnar* alphabet, an ancient Libyan script. Curiously, the Tamashek used by the little researched Kel Adrar Tuareg contains a number of words of Greek and Latin origin. For example, the Tamashek word for angel is *andjelos* (angelos in Greek/angelicas in Latin); the Tamashek word for star is *atre* (astre); the Tuareg word for soul is *eman*, which is similar to anima.

The presence of these and other words may be the result of the influence of North African/Berber Christians in the early Christian era and/or through trading contacts with Egypt.³

POPULATION

According to the late Danish anthropologist Nicolas Johannesen, there may be as many as 1.5 million Tuaregs (includes all classes and castes), living in Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya and to a much lesser extent in Burkina Faso, Nigeria and western Chad; however, there are probably no more than 300,000 noble Tuaregs in existence.

CURRENT SITUATION

The post-independence political divisions of Saharan Africa have made it increasingly difficult for the Tuareg to maintain their pastoral traditions. Moreover, droughts struck in 1968, 1969, 1973, and 1983-85, wiping out 40% of their livestock and resulting the starvation of many Tuareg (there was also a serious drought in 1945). The rebellion in the late 1980s and until 1995 only exacerbated the situation.

During the early-mid 1990's, tens of thousands of Tuaregs from Mali and Niger were refugees in Algeria, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Most of these have now returned home, but have lost the ability to survive as nomadic stockbreeders⁴.

³ There is no evidence that the Tuareg were ever significantly influenced by Christianity.

⁴ Tuareg revolts began in Mali in 1963; there was also a revolt in the Ahaggar against the French in 1916